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LOCAL CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

# Gun violence rises sharply in Montgomery County, police chief says

Chief Marcus Jones made remarks – citing year-to-date jumps – as county leaders introduced gun-control measure

By [Dan Morse](#)

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Gun violence has risen sharply in Montgomery County this year, with nonfatal shootings nearly double what they were 12 months ago, the jurisdiction's top officer said Monday.

Police Chief Marcus Jones made the remarks to reporters as county leaders discussed a proposed legislative action that would scale back the places someone could carry a handgun. He also spoke the day after dozens of gunshots were fired in a shopping center parking lot in Montgomery's Briggs Chaney area, sending a victim to the hospital with serious injuries and driving bullets into several businesses.

"Literally 60 rounds were fired in that parking lot," Jones said. "It just shows you that gun violence has become sort of the norm, which is not where we need to be."

While gun-related homicides are essentially flat compared with the same period last year, nonfatal shootings are up 75 percent and noncontact shootings have increased 29 percent, according to figures provided by the police department Monday.

"It is of grave concern," Jones said.

Leaders in Montgomery County following the rise in violence this year have cited several explanations.

One is the availability of firearms — in particular guns that can be assembled at home from parts ordered online. Residents build "ghost guns" — so named because they have no serial numbers — or buy them on the streets already assembled, police say.

Another big factor behind the violence, leaders say, is the disruption of so many young lives because of covid-19. Teenagers didn't have the structure of in-person classes or after-school programs.

"Kids on the cusp of being at risk fell toward criminality," Jessica Zarrella, a Montgomery County defense attorney and former prosecutor, said in an interview earlier this year.

Gabe Albornoz, president of the Montgomery County Council, added that the police department is stretched thin because officers are retiring at a higher rate than new police academy prospects are coming in — a trend Albornoz noted is taking place nationwide.

"It's a perfect negative storm," he said.

Under legislative action to be introduced Tuesday, Albornoz said, the county would make a "zone text amendment" to forbid a person — even if they have a "wear-and-carry permit" from the state — from taking a gun into a "place of public assembly."

The council president said such locations "are purposely wide-ranging," and could include places of worship, shopping centers and businesses.

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“Montgomery County is absolutely seeing a rise in gun violence,” said Len Holland, president of Montgomery’s police union. “It’s alarming the number of shootings our members are responding to on a weekly and in some cases daily basis.”

As of the end of June, homicides involving guns, victims and suspects under the age of 21 have more than doubled from 2021 to 2022, according to data from the Montgomery County Police Department.

“There are several contributors to the community violence, including drug robberies and interpersonal disputes or beefs, many of which begin or escalate on social media,” according to a recent report to the County Council on youth safety.

Between June 2021 and June 2022, according to the report, “there have been 20 firearm homicide victims in the County, of which eight were 21 and younger.”

The report also said county police have recovered more than 730 guns. About 110 of those were ghost guns. “These numbers are on track to overtake last year’s total of 1,192 recovered firearms,” the report said.

Tom Didone, who retired as a Montgomery assistant chief a year ago, agreed that the availability of firearms — ghost guns in particular — and the destabilizing effect of covid-19 have contributed to increased shooting violence.

“I think it’s all related,” he said.

Didone remains active on traffic safety matters with the International Association of Chiefs of Police. The No. 1 concern he hears from chiefs around the country is how do they get their officers to reengage in traffic stops.

“We’re still getting guns off the streets. It’s just not the same percentage,” he said.

Such stops have received scrutiny over the years because they can escalate into a fatal shooting by police and there have been concerns nationwide about disparities in such stops.

Didone acknowledged that, around the country, too many officers took the practice too far — coming up with any excuse to pull over a car, for example. But he said that as long as officers are making true traffic stops — running a red light, talking on a cellphone — he would welcome a return to officers more often using that as a chance to try to find guns.

“Officers have to get back to doing our job. Montgomery is moving back in this direction faster than a lot of places,” Didone said.

#### CLARIFICATION

This story has been updated with a clarification from Montgomery County police on gun violence numbers.